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Title	Al-Qaeda wants its own TV
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Citation	Silm, B. (2005). Al-Qaeda wants its own TV. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 073). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2005
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/4176
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Al Qaeda wants its own TV

Bouchaib Silm*

24 October 2005

ON September 21, 2005 Al Qaeda made an inroad into the world of television by launching its first edition via the internet. The telecast was made through a videotape entitled *Sawt al-Khilafa* (Voice of the Caliphate). It was dedicated to Osama bin Laden and other leading lights of Al Qaeda -- Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi – as well as Mullah Omar, the deposed Taliban leader, the Islamic armies in Chechnya, Kashmir and the Arabian peninsula. The fifteen-minute videotaped news was presented by a masked man seated behind a desk with the Qur'an placed on it. The background is provided by a brown curtain and a machine gun mounted on a tripod.

The video congratulated Muslims for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip and professed the Israeli withdrawal to be a great victory for the Muslim Ummah. There were extracts from al-Zarqawi's audio statement focusing on the declaration of war against the Shi'as and anyone collaborating with the American troops. There were also references to Al Qaeda's successes in confrontations with US troops, including footage of a claimed attack by the Islamic Army in Iraq against US forces in Baghdad. The video includes a segment devoted to a gloating account of the ravages of Hurricane Katrina.

The man who was presenting the news announced that the Islamic Army group in Iraq launched rockets at American forces in Baghdad, with a video clip showing this operation. A commercial break of sorts followed, which previewed a movie, "Total Jihad". The advertisement was in English. The video footage then moved to Spain's prosecution of the al-Jazeera TV journalist Taysir Allouni whom the Al Qaeda broadcaster referred to as 'our brother'. The journalist was charged with "collaboration with a terrorist organisation" by having helped to finance Al Qaeda through performing courier work for the group while reporting on the war in Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda's technological capability

This TV edition was, for many, evidence of Al Qaeda's technological capability. The terrorist group is constantly seeking new tools to reach its audience, both followers as well as enemies. However, it remains unclear if the desire for a weekly telecast, as stated at the opening of the video, can be achieved.

One week later the second broadcast appeared, with the first part of the broadcast focusing on the developments in the city of Gaza after the pull out of the Israeli soldiers. Another part

discussed the recent developments in Afghanistan with a mention of Ayman Al Zawahiri and his stand towards the recent elections in the country. Iraq was discussed in the third portion with a focus on the kidnapping and the killing of an old Sunni man by the group Badr, a Shi'a group of jihadists believed to be collaborating with American troops in fighting the insurgents. There is also news of an operation that ended with the killing of two American soldiers with footage carried out in the city of Arramadi. The last portion of the telecast focuses on the hunger that Muslims of Niger are facing, complete with footage to support this. The video also includes a (commercial break) announcing that there will be a message next week from the president of the Global Islamic Media Front to the journalists.

How did it all start?

Recently a statement posted on a Jihadist website explained that a Global Islamic Media Channel would soon be launched. It cited two reasons. Firstly, the Western media is not reflecting the reality of the war in Iraq. Secondly, the Western media is conducting an unjust war against the Mujahideen in several regions. As a result, the statement follows, the Western media is dishonouring the image of the Mujahideen and keeping silent about their victories. The statement declared that "We have decided in the Global Islamic Media to launch a media institution to be in charge of the news of Jihad. The name of this institution will be "*Sawt Al Khilafa*". The Global Islamic Media Front claims to be a free media establishment with the goal of showing the truth by supporting and preaching for Islam. The front is functioning as the platform for the Islamic media on the internet. It is therefore the Mujahideen's messenger to the Ummah and the non-Muslim community as well. The front does not belong to a specific group or individual and it has no geographical barriers.

Conclusion

What all this shows is that Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups have developed an impressive expertise in media communications. During the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the American administration and much of the rest of the world were expecting a near defeat of Al Qaeda. But what was missing at that time was that, while America was destroying the Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, bin Laden and his followers were planning a shift towards becoming a world movement that goes beyond geographical borders.

In fact, Al Qaeda has already decided to take a further step by moving from the ground to the internet. The strategy was neither one of choice, nor with a clear destination. But the reality is that Al Qaeda understood early that in order to continue its struggle and in order to spread its ideology and to be seen by its followers as well as by its enemies, it cannot completely rely on other media. Al Qaeda wanted to control all aspects of its message, and the ability to craft its presentation in a professional manner. It appears to be advancing both agendas.

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